

Police bill imminent, Offer says

BY TIMOTHY APPLEBY

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Solicitor-General Steven Offer said yesterday he hopes to table a new Ontario Police Act before the end of the year, incorporating the spirit of reform urged earlier this year by the province's task force on race relations and policing.

Mr. Offer said he has examined all of the task force's 57 recommendations and is generally receptive to those that could be translated into law.

"I view that as my responsibility, and I think that people would expect nothing less. Many people shared the direction of the report," he said.

The long-promised overhaul of the Police Act — the first major revamping for more than 40 years of the legislation that governs the province's 123 police forces — has been in the pipeline for several months.

The bill was to have been introduced by Mr. Offer's predecessor, Joan Smith. However Mrs. Smith was forced to quit her post, over an unrelated matter, before she could do so.

Mr. Offer said in an interview yesterday that one of the bill's aims will be to expand the concept of "community policing," meaning greater interaction between police forces and the populations they serve. In practical terms, this would mean a larger role in anticipating and preventing crime, rather than merely reacting to it, he said.

"Sitting down with community representatives. Discussing problems and discussing how those problems can be resolved. It's a sharing."

Block programs and the Crimestoppers programs are prototypes, he said. But he also hinted at much wider change.

In April, after listening to submissions from across the province, a six-member task force issued a wide-ranging list of recommendations designed to change the way Ontario's police forces are organized and governed.

Hiring and promotion, monitoring practices, training and guidelines on the use of force were among the key areas addressed by the task force, headed by Public Complaints Commissioner Clare Lewis.

He said he is optimistic the changes will be well received. Most police forces will be on side, as well, he said.

"I believe there can be a wide consensus here."

The bill was originally promised by the end of May. Mrs. Smith's resignation in June, over an improper visit to an OPP detachment on behalf of a friend, was preceded by a furor that put the bill on the back burner.